

No business case for skinny models in advertising

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New research from Massey University's Professor Leo Paas shows thin models are not appealing to most consumers.

France – the home of couture – is on the verge of banning very thin models from runways and fashion spreads. Should the legislation be passed the fashion industry has little to fear, says a Massey University marketing researcher.

Professor Leo Paas says it's well accepted that skinny models in advertising campaigns can damage the self-esteem of female consumers, but his research also shows they can damage a company's bottom line.

Professor Paas recently led a unique research project where young female participants were shown advertising images featuring either a very thin model or a healthy-sized model. In the photos, the models wore either a bikini or a skirt and top.

The results showed the adverts featuring the healthy-sized model were more effective at every level. The adverts using the very thin model were a turn-off to many.

"The healthy-sized model was considered more attractive, the advertisement was viewed more positively and considered ethically acceptable, and the intention to buy the featured product was higher," Professor Paas says.

"The strongest negative reaction was generated by the the thin model wearing a bikini, presumably because it was easier to see how just thin she was. This was an interesting result because it is generally believed that thinner models represent the Western ideal of beauty and are deemed more attractive."

In a follow-up study Professor Paas tried to identify the 'optimum' model size for an advertising image as far as consumer preference is concerned. Various versions of an advertisement were created where the model was digitally manipulated to represent a range of body sizes.

"We found that consumers preferred what I call the 'golden mean' – a healthy-sized model who was neither too thin nor too large led to the most effective advertisement," Professor Paas says. "This confirmed that if companies use very thin models their advertising will be less effective

with mainstream consumers."

He says that while the survey results showed the images featuring larger models were also less effective, it doesn't mean that 'backlash campaigns' that use larger models can't work. Dove's 'Campaign for Real Beauty', which uses women of varying sizes who were not previously professional models, is a good example.

"Without any context an intermediate-sized model works best, but in campaigns like Dove's where they are making a statement, larger models can really work in their favour from an ethical standpoint.

"Dove receives valuable and positive word of mouth for its campaigns, but they do have a first mover's advantage. I think if this approach became very common, then it might lose its effectiveness, but Dove will always be associated with that gesture."

Professor Paas says the [fashion industry](#) may believe its products hang better on a very thin [model](#), but this is probably the view of a small and targeted group.

"Marketers that use very thin models either have a perception of their audience that is not correct, or they are listening to a small group of fashion leaders who reside in Milan or Paris," he says. "The research shows the views of this very small minority don't work for a mainstream advertising campaign."

Meanwhile Professor Paas is watching developments in France with interest.

"It will be interesting to see whether the ban, if implemented, changes French perceptions of the ideal body size – if less very [thin models](#) appear in the media, will it lead to fuller figures becoming the ideal?"

Provided by Massey University

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